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A MODEL OF DISCIPLINE IN ORGANIZATIONAL SETTINGS.(U)
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A Model of Discipline in Organizational Settings

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Technical Report TR #1

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ABSTRACT

The report details the results of the first phase of a large scale research study investigating discipline and the effects of discipline in a large Southern Texas oil refinery. The Fifty seven interviews were conducted with hourly maintenance and operation employees. Based on these employees' descriptions of the discipline process and how it works, a preliminary model was developed. Variables associated with the employee, the disciplinary agent, the situation, and the refinery complex (or system) were specified as potentially influencing the disciplinary process.

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While the use of punishment or threat of punishment is perhaps a relatively common phenomenon in organizational and industrial settings, the topic of punishment or discipline has received essentially no research attention from organizational researchers. Although research in other applied settings has revealed that punishment is effective in reducing or eliminating undesirable behavior, organizational behaviorists and behaviorists have focused almost entirely on "positive" reward systems for modifying and changing employee behavior (Konachi, Barwick, and Scott, 1978; Pedalino and Gamboa, 1974; Stephens and Borroughs, 1978).

Earlier, Arvey (1980) identified some of the beliefs about the effects of punishment, outlined some variables which might potentially influence the effectiveness of punishment/discipline in organizational settings, and specified some research designs which could be used to study discipline.

The present research project has been funded by ONR in order to learn more about discipline and the effectiveness of discipline in organizational settings. The study is being conducted in a major Southern Texas oil refinery complex. Hourly workers (predominantly male) who are classified as either in operations or maintenance positions are participating in the study.

The present report documents the findings of the first research phase of our research investigating the use of discipline in organizational settings.

Our objective in this first phase was to learn as much as we could about the disciplinary process and how it works in a major Southern Texas oil company. This report details:

- 1) the type of methodology we employed in this first phase - specifically, the interview format.
- 2) the sampling plan used to obtain our subjects.

3) the development of a preliminary model of the discipline process based on the information collected.

Phase I Research

Initially, we felt that we could use a critical incident methodology in which employees would be asked to relate specific instances in which they felt punished or disciplined.

One way to obtain critical incidents would be to have job incumbents write out responses to a set of instructions or questions regarding a specific disciplinary event. Another way to obtain this information would be through the use of structured interviews.

Some of the advantages of the interview method over an essay method of data collection are: less skill is required on the part of the interviewee (interviews do not require legible handwriting or good grammar, for example), more flexibility (an interview procedure can be changed at any time, even in mid-interview), interview data is sometimes more "rich" and detailed than essay data, and finally, conducting interviews can convey empathy and build rapport with plant employees.

The interview also has disadvantages, however, including problems in areas of: (a) efficiency--interviews require a lot of time and are costly, (b) validity--interviewers can bias responses in a number of ways, and interviewees may alter reality if they feel it is to their advantage to do so, and (c) ease of analysis--interview data is difficult to code and quantify. Despite these disadvantages, it was felt that the exploratory nature of the first phase of the project demanded that certain advantages of the interview (chiefly, its flexibility and the "richness" of the data it provides) be given substantial weight in the decision as to which technique to use, thus, the interview was utilized to collect the critical incidents.

The interview consisted of three major components. The first component was the introduction in which the rationale for the study was given, along with a pledge of confidentiality of information. Also, the employees were asked to read and sign an informed consent form during this part of the interview. The second part of the interview focused on obtaining specific incidents of discipline from the employees. The original goal of this second section of the interview was to elicit incidents which reflected either a "fair" or "unfair" situation, in addition to reflecting an incident which occurred to the employee him/herself or some other employee. Thus, the intent was to obtain incidents according to the following design:

	Self	Other
Fair		
Unfair		

In this part of the interview employees were instructed as follows:

Please think of a time during your employment with Shell when someone you know (you) was (were) disciplined fairly (unfairly). Maybe the boss or another worker got on their (your) case or yelled at them (you), or maybe the supervisor or foreman wrote someone (you) up, and went through formal procedures for disciplining an employee. When you have thought of this event, please tell me about it. Tell me what led up to the event, what the people involved said and did, what the discipline was, and how you felt about it.

For each incident given by the employee, a number of follow-up questions were

asked if the interviewee did not initially provide the information sought. Examples of these follow-up questions include, "How did you feel about the disciplinary agent?", "What happened to employee morale after the incident?", "When did the discipline occur?", "Was the action taken appropriate?", and "How could the situation have been handled better?".

The last section of the interview dealt with the interviewee's perceptions and feelings about the disciplinary system in general. Examples of questions asked during this part of the interview include, "In general, how do you feel about the discipline system?", "How could the system be improved?", and "If an employee feels he/she has been treated unfairly, what can he/she do about it?"

Subjects

After developing the interview format, the next step in this phase of the project was the random selection of 100 employees from the total plant population of around 2,500. Before any employees were selected, the total employee population was classified into various groups on the basis of five characteristics: sex, tenure, race, position (operations vs. maintenance work) and location (chemical plant vs. refinery). A proportionate number of employees was then randomly selected from within each of these cells in order to obtain a representative sample of the various employee factions that make up the Deer Park complex.

After the sample was selected, the employees chosen by this process were sent a letter explaining the project and then contacted by telephone by a member of the research team and asked to participate in the study. All interviews were arranged to coincide with the end of an employee's shift and Shell paid the employees overtime for their participation in the project.

Of the 95 employees contacted during this phase of the project, 18 did not appear for their scheduled interview, 20 declined to be interviewed, and 57 were

interviewed. Six different interviewers, all members of the research team, conducted the interviews. The interviews ranged from 15 minutes to an hour and a half in length, with the average interview lasting about 45 minutes.

Midway through this phase of the project, a meeting of the interviewers was held and two problems were discussed: first, employees were having trouble producing four incidents that fit into the 2 X 2 table (self-other, fair-unfair), and second, the employees were often unable to articulate much detail concerning the specific incidents. As a result of these problems, more emphasis was placed on eliciting general themes concerning the disciplinary system rather than specific incidents. A "theme" is essentially a more abstract and generalized statement about the disciplinary system associated with an individual work group, or department. For example, one of the major themes running through many, if not most, of the interviews was that the employee's supervisor was inconsistent in the way he/she administered discipline.

After reviewing the data from the 57 interviews, it became apparent that similar themes were revealed in many of the interviews and that the information being collected was redundant. A decision was made to stop interviewing employees and begin work on the second phase of the project, developing an instrument to assess disciplinary procedures in organizations. This is where the project currently stands.

The incidents and themes unearthed in the first phase of this study are reviewed in the next section. The results are organized and discussed in the context of a model of discipline behavior which was developed on the basis of the data obtained in the interviews.

A MODEL OF DISCIPLINE BEHAVIOR

This model of discipline behavior, as shown in Figure 1, indicates the factors, and the relationships between the factors, which were suggested as determinants of discipline behavior. A brief description of this model follows.

Initially, an employee exhibits a particular behavior. The disciplinary agent (whether he/she be a supervisor or a co-worker) holds some perception of what happened (what the behavior and the surrounding circumstances were) and of why the behavior occurred; that is, he/she makes a causal attribution (Green and Mitchell, 1979). A logical hypothesis is that the more the agent attributes the behavior to factors internal to the employee (such as intention to violate the rule), the more likely he/she is to take disciplinary action and the more severe that action is likely to be. If the agent attributes the cause of the behavior to external factors (tardiness due to car trouble, for example), he/she might be less likely to discipline the employee, and more likely to impose a mild penalty than a severe one if any disciplinary action is taken. Both the causal attributions and the more encompassing overall perceptions of the situation are influenced by system factors, disciplinary agent factors, employee factors, and situational factors. Each of these factors will be explained in greater detail below, along with relevant data obtained from the interviews.

The disciplinary agent's perception of the exhibited behavior forms the basis of a decision-making process which involves three steps: (1) a decision about whether the behavior was a rule infraction; (2) if so, a decision about whether some sort of discipline-related action should be taken; (3) if action is to be taken, a decision about what the action should be. The action (or lack of action) which results from this decision process impacts the employee's perceptions concerning the consequences, as well as influencing other co-workers' perceptions and feelings.

The employee's perceptions are also influenced as a result of an exchange process with other employees (i.e., communicating and sharing with others one's feelings about and reaction to a disciplinary measure). Future employee behaviors and feelings are determined by several factors: (a) the consequence of a rule infraction (i.e., the discipline), (b) how he/she feels about the discipline, and (c) how other employees react to the discipline.

The perceptions, feelings, and behaviors of the individual employee and co-workers which result from disciplinary action feed back to management and influence management's perception of the effectiveness of the disciplinary system. If the system appears to be ineffective (or could be more effective with modifications), system factors can be changed.

INFORMATION DERIVED FROM INTERVIEWS

The data generated by employees concerning the disciplinary system was extremely rich and revealing. As mentioned earlier, they revealed that the disciplinary action received by employees depended on several factors. We will discuss these factors in the context of the model presented earlier.

System Factors

Employees indicated that there exist several system factors of almost a structural nature which influence the level and kind of discipline received. These included the following:

1. Type of work. Some employees indicated that there were considerable differences in disciplinary action depending on whether an employee was working in operations as opposed to maintenance.
2. Organizational type. Employees reported that disciplinary practices varied depending on whether individuals were employed in the refinery or chemical plant division of the complex.

3. Organizational policies. Obvious factors which influence the level and type of discipline received are the formal rules and regulations which specify the various kinds of penalties that may be assessed for particular rule infractions.

The three system factors outlined above are more-or-less formal, structural aspects of the organization. In addition to these, employees revealed several informal system factors which influence discipline.

These informal system factors are perceptions of the system and its operations, and are analogous to components of organizational climate. The factors mentioned by interviewees included the following:

1. Reward-discipline orientation. There were comments by employees that the organization was oriented more toward taking disciplinary action for undesirable behaviors than toward rewarding employees for exhibiting desirable behaviors.

2. Degree of leniency/strictness. During the course of the interviews, employees indicated that while there was a high frequency of minor rule infractions by employees (e.g. reading on the job, taking "cat" naps, etc.), the company was generally lenient in its applications of discipline.¹ Thus, while there apparently is a high base rate of infractions for certain rules, there is a low base for the actual application of formal discipline.

3. Top managements's mood. The leniency/strictness factor mentioned above, though consistently tending toward leniency, varies somewhat over time as a function of top management's mood or attitude. On occasion, management "cracks down" on rule violators, and the prevailing mood becomes one of strict enforcement of rules and regulations. However, this strictness gradually diminishes until the previous level of enforcement is again reached.

Disciplinary Agent Factors

Employees at the complex mentioned that the level and kind of discipline received sometimes depended on factors associated with the particular foreman or supervisor viewing the rule infraction. These factors included the following:

1. Race. While race of the supervisor was said to be a factor (particularly in interaction with the race of subordinates), no consistent relationship was developed in the interviews. However, race of the disciplinary agent is a factor which could indeed influence the discipline applied to subordinates.
2. Sex of agent. Like race, sex of supervisor was indicated as a factor influencing the discipline applied. Most commonly, female employees reported differential discipline between male and female employees, and occasionally attributed this difference to the sex of the supervisor.
3. Age of agent. Differences in the application of discipline by older and younger supervisors was noted by interviewees. However, this factor may be confounded with management style and tenure with the organization. For example, references to age were generally found in conjunction with references to a more strict "by-the-book" style of discipline held by older supervisors who have been with the company longer. This is in contrast to a more laissez-faire and lenient attitude of younger and/or newer supervisors. In addition, more lenient discipline was perceived by employees as resulting from a more apathetic attitude of older foremen/supervisors who were near retirement, and no longer concerned about future consequences of their work behavior.
4. Religious beliefs. Some employees cited incidents involving supervisors who were highly religious and whose disciplinary behavior reflected this moral structure. For example, one female employee who did not live according to the moral code of her supervisor claimed the discipline she received from this particular supervisor was unwarranted.

5. Management style. Differences were noted in the discipline behavior of foremen who closely supervised their subordinates (engaged in "bird-dogging") and those who allowed their subordinates to work more independently. The former were said to be more likely to take disciplinary action than were the latter.

6. Position/status as a regular or hourly (substitute) foreman. There are two, possibly interacting, components of this factor. Hourly foremen were said to be stricter disciplinarians than regular staff foremen; interviewees believed this was due to the hourly foremen's attempts to "make points" with management in order to move up in the organization. The second component mentioned, which influences employee feelings about disciplinary action, is that subordinates lack respect for hourly foremen; it seems likely that this may be a result of the first component.

Employee Factors

Employees indicated that there were several factors associated with the employees themselves which influenced the discipline received. These factors reflected both personal characteristics and past work record (unofficial as well as official) of the employee who exhibited the rule infraction.

1. Race. Two opposing themes were revealed. White employees generally indicated that minority employees were both less likely to be disciplined and more likely to receive lenient discipline than white employees committing the same infraction; they believed this was due to the company's being careful to avoid discrimination claims and associated legal action.

Employees of minority races, however, indicated that white employees were less likely to be disciplined and more likely to receive lenient discipline than were minorities due to the biases of the agent.

2. Sex of the employee. Again, two opposing views were revealed. Some female interviewees claimed that male supervisors were more likely to take disciplinary action and took more severe action against female employees than against male employees; they believed this was due to the supervisor's bias against women. Male employees, on the other hand, generally indicated that females were less likely to be disciplined and more likely to receive less severe discipline than men due to company attempts to avoid discrimination charges.

3. Age. Some interviewees indicated that younger employees were more likely to be disciplined and to be disciplined more severely than older employees.

4. Ability/skill. Indications were that better skilled employees were less likely to be disciplined and more likely to receive milder discipline than less skilled employees.

5. Work record. An employee's official and unofficial work record was said to be a primary determinant of whether and how he/she was disciplined. Employees have an official record which is maintained in their files. In addition, supervisors have unofficial perceptions of an employee's work history. Official elements include:

a. Tardiness/attendance record. Employees whose official records indicate fewer occurrences of absenteeism and tardiness (particularly if those few are excusable) are less likely than others to be disciplined and more likely than others to receive milder discipline.

b. Length of employment with department and /or organization. Interviewees indicated that more-recently-hired employees were more likely to be disciplined than are employees who have been with the department or organization for longer periods of time.

c. Discipline history. Employees with records indicating more frequent disciplinary actions in the past, are more likely to receive discipline when a rule infraction is perceived than individuals with fewer past disciplinary actions.

d. Work performance. The quality and quantity of the work done by an employee and the frequency with which he/she makes errors are elements contributing to a disciplinary agent's decision to discipline or not. Highly effective employees are less likely to be disciplined.

Other elements which are perhaps part of the official work record which influence the agent's perceptions are such things as:

a. Degree of cooperation. This involves the agent's beliefs as to whether the employee works with or against the company, management, and co-workers.

b. Motivation to perform. This element involves the agent's perception, based on employee comments and actions, as to whether or not an employee is motivated to work hard and do a good job.

c. Attitude. This element may be related to motivation; that is, an employee's motivation may be assessed via agent perceptions of the attitude one appears to have towards one's job, co-workers, and the organization.

We assume that a disciplinary agent somehow attaches weights to each of these elements to form a composite index by which he/she decides whether and how to discipline an employee.

The disciplinary agent and employee factors discussed above are relatively stable; that is, they are not likely to change greatly with time. There are, however, some variable agent and employee factors which will influence the expression of the fixed factors. These are random fluctuations in the condition of the agent

and/or employee (physical and/or emotional states, for example). An individual who is ill or who has recently had an argument may not exhibit his typical high-quality work or cooperativeness; the same applies to disciplinary agents.

Situational Factors

Situational factors are not necessarily related to the individuals involved, nor to the organization, in general. They usually are specific to the particular job or task, or to the environment at the time the behavior and/or disciplinary action occur. Examples of situational factors collected during the interviews were as follows:

1. Severity of rule infraction. Interviewees were almost unanimous in stating that severity of penalties/discipline should parallel the severity of the rule infraction. Employees described incidents in which severity of the rule infraction was influential in determining the severity of the penalty to be assessed. In these cases, disciplinary action more closely paralleled the severity of rule infraction.
2. The importance of the task/job. The notion that, the nature of the job or task on which an employee was working was a factor influencing the nature of discipline received, emerged from several interviews. Some jobs and tasks are more critical or important than others because of possible impact on the safety of others or oneself and/or are more vital to the organization's product. The incidents reflected the concept that rule infractions committed by employees performing these critical tasks were dealt with more strictly than those of individuals working in less critical jobs, given the same rule infraction.
3. Severity of consequences of rule infraction. An infraction which results in a lost life was said to be deserving of more severe disciplinary action than

one in which an employee receives only a minor injury.

4. Presence of absence of other people. Interviewees indicated that the presence of others could both decrease and increase the likelihood of one's being disciplined, depending on who the other person(s) was (were). The presence of a union representative decreased the likelihood and severity of disciplinary action. The presence of co-workers in one situation increased the chances that a supervisor/disciplinary agent would stand by his initial statement and go ahead with discipline of an employee. In another instance, an employee stated that the reason a supervisor backed down and changed his mind about disciplining him was because no other people were present thus the agent did not feel pressured to follow through with his initial threat of discipline.

5. Job pressure. In situations where an employee might be working under time pressure (e.g. to repair a malfunctioning machine which is holding up the whole plant operation), employees reported that the disciplinary procedures are perhaps more lenient.

Kinds of Discipline

In addition to the mediating factors above, information was also obtained from interviewees about the kinds of discipline applied. Those mentioned are outlined below.

1. Vigilance. In this case, disciplinary action takes the form of close monitoring of an employee's activities at work.
2. Pressure to conform. This form of discipline seemed to be more often used by co-workers than supervisors. Incidents were cited in which employees who worked harder than the norm set by other employees were pressured to cut back and not "show up" their co-workers. This pressure was effected

through comments and ostracism.

3. Holding an employee back. This refers to action taken to prevent an employee's making upward progress within a department or the organization.

4. Warnings. This action was found to be common at the complex. Warnings given to employees were oral and/or written; they simply conveyed the message that the employee would be disciplined (presumably more severely) if certain undesirable behaviors continued to occur.

5. Suspension. This involves an employee being told to not report to work for a certain period of time, for which he goes without pay. This action was also found to be commonly used at the complex.

6. Demotion. One employee cited an incident in which he was transferred from a crane operator's position to a truck driver's position, and was required to take a corresponding cut in pay.

7. Assignment of unpleasant work. Employees described incidents in which employees were temporarily assigned to work in a "bull gang" as a result of rule infractions. According to interviewees, the bull gang performs miscellaneous jobs usually involving hard labor.

8. Dismissal. This action, of course, involves the employee's losing his/her job. This disciplinary action was taken against two employees involved in a fight in which one man stabbed another man. An employee was also dismissed for punching another employee on company premises; this action was subsequently reversed by the organization who decided to suspend the employee instead.

Thus a fairly wide range of types and kinds of disciplinary action was found to be in use at the complex.

Next Steps

While the interview results and the specifications of a model have been useful, this work needs to be followed up with more precise measurement techniques to verify and test the suggested model. Our current work effort involves the development of an extensive questionnaire to be administered to all hourly employees ($N \sim 2500$) and their immediate supervisors regarding their perceptions of discipline and the disciplinary process. We will attempt to pinpoint how the disciplinary process occurs and to determine the impact of discipline on morale, satisfaction, and undesirable behaviors. In addition, we will examine the effects of discipline as it impacts the work group as well as the individual employee. We suspect that the role discipline plays in organizational settings may be particularly important for co-workers and work groups as a "signaling" or "cue" device.

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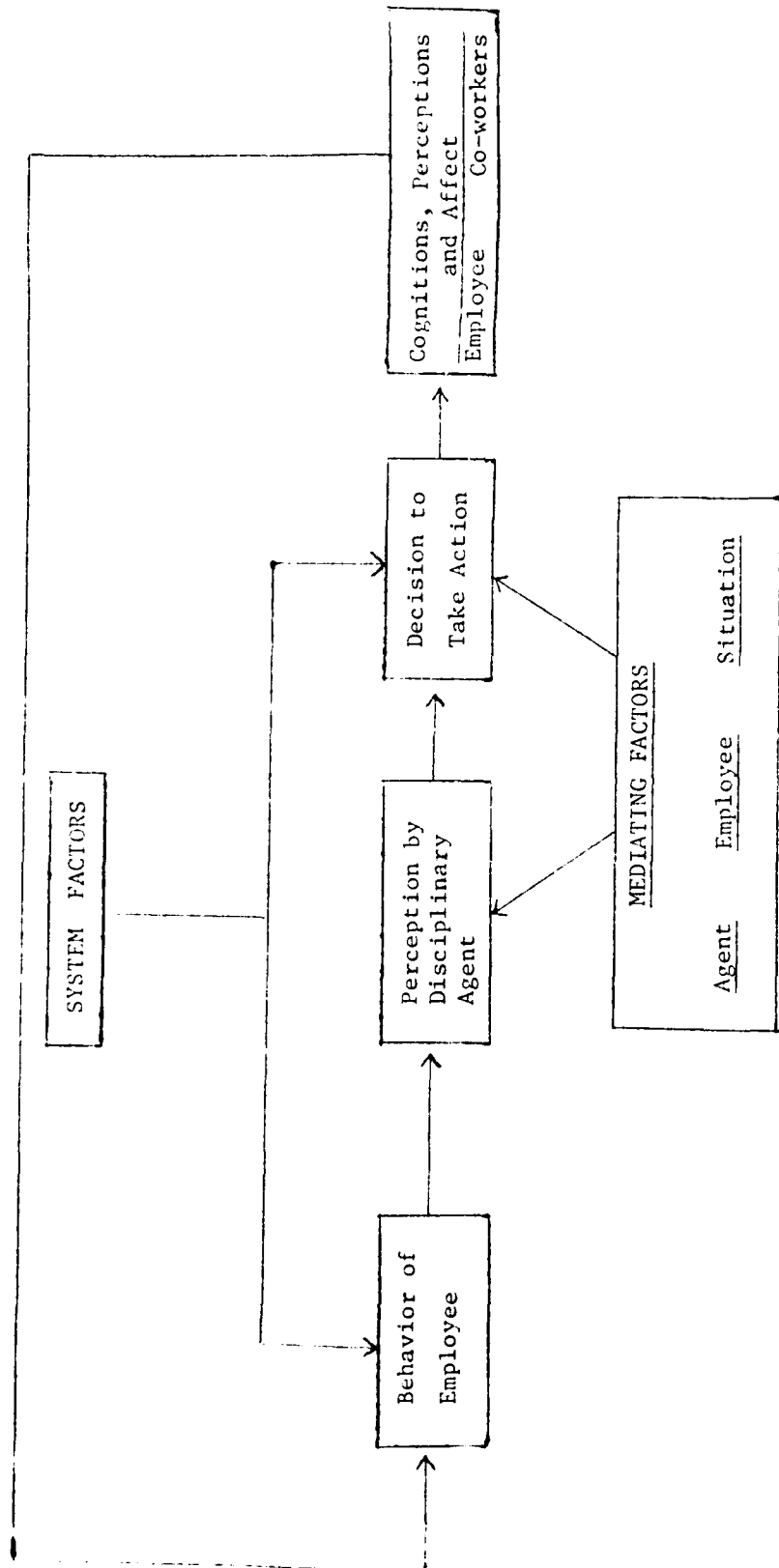
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NOTES

1. This is not for absenteeism and tardiness. Employees reported the company as being very strict in its application of discipline with employees who are late/absent.

MODEL OF DISCIPLINARY ACTION



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